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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9338
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 3942
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1423
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3118
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6439
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4048
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0545
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0533
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2480
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0154
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000087

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: FORMER STUDENT LEADERS: MOBILIZING THE MIDDLE

REF: 04 RANGOON 1499

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Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Kyi, former student leaders of Burma's 1988 pro-democracy movement, have become increasingly active in the year since their release from lengthy prison terms. GOB authorities have eased off their surveillance in recent months, prompting the two activists to speak out, participate in political events, and venture up country. This gives hope to many democracy supporters yearning for new leadership to revitalize the political opposition. The regime, however, will not likely allow the two activists to resume the high-profile roles they played in the 1980s. Nonetheless, their intent to remain active is remarkable and they could succeed in mobilizing the politically quiet, but increasingly discontented, middle--but they will have to walk a very fine line. End Summary.

12. (C) On January 20, Charge and P/E Chief met with Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, former student leaders of the pro-democracy movement that the current military regime violently crushed in 1988. The GOB released Min Ko Naing in November 2004 (reftel) and Ko Ko Gyi in March 2005, after they had each served more than 15 years in regime prisons, much of which was in solitary confinement. Min Ko Naing is now 43 years old and Ko Ko Gyi is 45 and, despite their prolonged absence from the public scene, the two activists remain extremely popular among several generations of Burmese. They meet widely with pro-democracy activists and ethnic minorities.

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

13. (C) Although the GOB released the two democracy activists without conditions, authorities closely monitor their post-release activities. Past meetings with Embassy officers, for example, have resulted in their interrogation

by security officials. The two activists said, however, that government authorities have eased up a bit on surveillance in recent months. The two have taken advantage of this opening to broaden some of their political activities and movements, including publishing letters and statements and attending political party events. They also made a recent trip to Mandalay, their first travel outside of Rangoon since their release from prison.

¶4. (C) Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi--who are supportive of, but independent from, the NLD and other pro-democracy parties--said that during their first few months of freedom, many Burmese were frightened to approach the famous student leaders over fear of repercussion from the GOB. In recent months, however, many Burmese have actively engaged the two activists, seeking their counsel and presence at political and private events. They said that their visit to Mandalay for the birthday of an elderly activist/author drew large crowds of supporters, as well as the heavy-handed attention of local security officials.

NOW HEAR THIS

¶5. (C) Since their release, the two activists have met on several occasion with GOB officials, including one early encounter with the Minister of Home Affairs, whom they viewed as "blunt and un-diplomatic." Min Ko Naing described these meetings as "essentially useless; they only lecture to us and don't want to listen to our views." The activists suggested to officials that that the GOB undertake efforts to seek national reconciliation. Rather than exchange views on the process, however, GOB officials responded by telling the two former students to "read the (state) newspaper and you will see that we are already doing everything to resolve the situation."

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¶6. (C) Ko Ko Gyi said that one advantage of their meetings with the GOB has been the de facto recognition that the regime gives the students. The GOB, he said, has not officially authorized their nascent organization of former student activists, "The 88 Student Generation," but the authorities did not refute their declaration upon release to remain politically active. Min Ko Naing noted that Burmese Police officials summoned the two activists following a May triple bombing in Rangoon to specifically tell them that they were not under suspicion and that, to the contrary, the regime "respected and honored" the role the students had played in Burmese history.

TALKING POLITICS

¶7. (C) According to the two activists, there is an ongoing debate within the pro-democracy movement over the relative importance of the results of the 1990 elections. Many democracy members, including NLD leaders, have come to the conclusion that the movement can use its victory in 1990 as a basis to engage the regime in a political dialogue, rather than just insist that the SPDC honor the results. "We must be flexible," said Ko Ko Gyi, "After all, the election was for a new legislature and did not mean that the regime must immediately hand over power for all three branches of government." He added that it is "essential to retain the dignity" of those who won seats, but also that of the military government that held the original election.

¶8. (C) Ko Ko Gyi agreed with the Charge that the United States can help by pushing for an inclusive and meaningful political dialogue, but that the Burmese people must, working together, design and implement their own viable solution. The activists expressed appreciation for USG pressure on the GOB, and support for the democracy movement, and appealed for U.S. support to convince China, India, and others in the region to press for reform. The Charge replied that we have embarked on this course in recent months and observed that

most countries, including those that had been more sympathetic toward the regime, appeared supportive of efforts to urge reform and find a peaceful solution to the country's political problems. "No one," she added, "stands to gain from the current situation."

WHERE THE HELP IS NEEDED

¶9. (C) When asked what more the United States could be doing to be helpful, the two activists thanked the Charge for helping to arrange their English language instruction at the Embassy's American Center. They remain reluctant, however, to attend classes there regularly for fear of attracting too much attention from the regime.

¶10. (C) Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi appealed for additional support for political prisoners and their families, most of whom are denied access to basic education and health services. Former political prisoners who attend Embassy courses on full scholarship, they said, would benefit from stipends to help cover basic living costs. They noted that the exile group "Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)" funneled some assistance inside Burma, but that many potential recipients declined the help, fearing GOB retribution. The activists confirmed that international short-wave radio broadcasts reach a wide audience in Burma and they said that the distribution of hand-cranked radios throughout the country would help improve access to information.

COMMENT: WALKING A FINE LINE

¶11. (C) Many within the pro-democracy movement are despairing of the regime's ability to silence the voices of leaders such

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as Aung San Suu Kyi and Hkun Htun Oo, and now place their desperate hopes on the former students to revitalize the political opposition. Despite the two activists' increased visibility, however, the regime will likely move quickly to re-arrest Min Ko Naing and/or Ko Ko Gyi if authorities perceive broad support for their activities.

¶12. (C) We believe Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi both understand GOB-imposed limitations and they appear at ease, for the moment, to play relatively quiet and unassuming roles in support of democracy and human rights. Having lost much of their youth in the prison gulag, however, their intent to remain active is remarkable. If they can succeed in bringing the Burma's many pro-democracy factions together, they could mobilize the politically quiet, but increasingly discontented, middle--but they will have to walk a very fine line. End Comment.

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